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AUTHOR Henkin, Alan B.; Dee, Jay R.; Manzo, Louis
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ABSTRACT

This study focused on how U.S. Catholic college and university presidents view the relationship between the Catholic church and Catholic institutions of higher education. The specific focus was on college and university presidents' perceptions of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," a set of mandates issued by Pope John Paul II in 1990 and approved for implementation in the United States in 2001. One-fourth of the 44 respondents viewed "Ex Corde" as incompatible with academic freedom. One-third of the respondents viewed "Ex Corde" as incompatible with institutional autonomy. Presidents of large institutions were more likely to express concerns about the effects of "Ex Corde" on institutional autonomy and faculty recruitment. Clergy presidents and lay presidents did not differ in their views about the mandates. The survey also reveals concerns regarding the position of Catholic colleges within a competitive student choice market. (Contains 1 figure and 21 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Institutional Identity, Pressures for Change, and Executive Leadership at U.S. Catholic Colleges and Universities

Alan B. Henkin
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242
alan-henkin@uiowa.edu

Jay R. Dee
University of Massachusetts – Boston
Boston, MA 02125
jay.dee@umb.edu

Louis Manzo
Stonehill College
Easton, MA 02357
lmanzo@stonehill.edu

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on how US Catholic college and university presidents view the relationship between the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions of higher education. Specifically, we examined presidents' perceptions of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, a set of mandates issued by the Pope in 1990 and approved for implementation in the US in 2001. One-fourth of respondents viewed *Ex Corde* as incompatible with academic freedom. One-third of respondents viewed *Ex Corde* as incompatible with institutional autonomy. Presidents of large institutions were more likely to express concerns about the effects of *Ex Corde* on institutional autonomy and faculty recruitment. Clergy presidents and lay presidents did not differ in their views toward the mandates. The survey also revealed concerns regarding the position of Catholic colleges within a competitive student choice market.

Institutional Identity, Pressures for Change, and Executive Leadership at US Catholic Colleges and Universities

Introduction

For the past forty years or more, US Catholic colleges and universities have been debating their Catholic identity (Cox, 1966). The focus of the debate is primarily ideological and involves "lack of consensus as to the substantive content of the ensemble of religious beliefs, moral commitments and academic assumptions that supposedly constitute Catholic identity" (Gleason, 1995, p. 320).

The identity discussion appears to have intensified in recent years as colleges moved in the direction of more "practical" curricula that placed less emphasis on traditional religious courses (Burtchaell, 1998). The diminishing presence of overt religious activity may be viewed as a "cost" of operating in competitive markets where comparable choices are readily available. Substantial reliance on tuition revenue, modest endowments, and increasing dependence on government funding have accelerated the movement toward secularization. Changes have also been driven by Catholic academics themselves. For several decades, they have expressed concern over the scholarly shortcomings and anti-intellectualism of their institutions (Curran & McCormick, 1988; Gleason, 1995). The decline of membership in religious communities who founded most of the Catholic colleges in the US, moreover, has resulted in a trend toward institutional governance by lay boards and presidents.

The debate over Catholic identity was extended in 1990, when Pope John Paul II issued an Apostolic Constitution on Catholic higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The document delineated the Vatican's vision for Catholic higher education and provided guidelines, or General Norms, to facilitate fulfillment of its vision (Lavelle, 1994).

Norms for US Catholic colleges were developed and revised by *Ex Corde*'s implementing authority, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), in response to the 1990 Vatican statement. In 2000, the Vatican approved the revised norms, which specified ways in which Catholic institutions should proceed to strengthen and clarify their religious identities. The rules stipulated that:

- Catholic institutions are to express publicly their Catholic identity, either in a mission statement or some other document.
- Catholic teaching is to influence all institutional activities.
- Courses in Catholic doctrine should be available to all students.
- All teachers and administrators, at the time of their appointment, are to be informed about the Catholic identity of their institution and about their responsibility to promote, or at least to respect, that identity.
- The majority of faculty members should be Catholic.
- Presidents should express commitment to the Catholic faith consistent with canon law.
- Catholic theologians are required to seek a mandate (*mandatum)* from their bishop. The mandate specifies that theology teachers are to acknowledge the Church as the authentic interpreter of Scripture and uphold the Church's interpretation in their teaching.

Many scholars and several, but fewer, college and university presidents have opposed some of the norms and the *mandatum* as contrary to US higher education traditions and antithetical to academic freedom. Presidents may be wary of defining a juridical relationship between the Church and Catholic institutions that could jeopardize institutional autonomy and entangle colleges in lawsuits with significant financial consequences (Piderit, 1999). The popular press has fueled the debate, from time to time, reporting, for example, that "Catholic bishops are moving toward tighter control over what the nation's Catholic colleges and universities teach…and [that] proposed controls could endanger public aid, threatening the survival of some schools, and would violate academic procedures and civil law", while "Catholic conservatives say some church-

affiliated colleges are nearly indistinguishable from secular campuses" (Boston *Globe*, 25 September 1999, A16). There has been an effort by the implementing authorities, in contrast, to temper the tenor of the debate through characterization of *Ex Corde* as a vehicle for strengthening and revitalizing Catholic higher education in terms of both institutional identity and academic excellence (Finney, 1999; Schulte, 1999).

It is apparent that the days have passed when governance issues of Catholic colleges and universities, operated by religious communities or under the control of the bishop of the diocese, were concerns of internal authorities alone. Today, most Catholic colleges and universities have separate boards of control or trustees, which have much to say about the directions of the institutions, the composition of the faculty, and the shape of the curriculum, among other issues. Whether out of conviction or necessity, leaders of these institutions find themselves mediating a dialogue – some might say a contest of wills – between ecclesiastical and secular authorities on the subject of appropriate directions for Church-affiliated higher education. *Ex Corde* has functioned to sharpen existing differences of perspective and punctuated the equilibrium of a steady movement toward secularization.

Purpose of Study

In the midst of turbulent external environments, Catholic college presidents are key actors in a reconciliation-development process through which Catholic higher education seeks to build on what has been developed in the US over generations while maintaining its religious identity (Steinfels, 1999). The confounding complexities and inevitable conflicts that have emanated from debates related to *Ex Corde* and the Catholic

identity of institutions are likely to continue to challenge the leadership skills of Catholic college presidents.

The purpose of this study was to assess Catholic college presidents' perceptions of the external environment in which their institutions operate. Specifically, this study focused on how Catholic college presidents view the relationship between the Church and institutions of higher education. We conducted a national survey of Catholic college presidents to examine their perceptions of *Ex Corde* as they relate to institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and economic viability in a changing marketplace.

Method

Procedure

The survey consisted of three parts: questions related to the institutional context, questions related to *Ex Corde*, and questions designed to elicit information on demographic, work experience, and institutional characteristics. Institutional questions were adapted from the Institutional Performance Survey (IPS; Krakower & Niwa, 1985). The IPS has been used to characterize the internal processes and organizational cultures of colleges and universities (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). Selected IPS items for this study include those related to competition for students, availability of financial resources, internal resistance to change, centralization of decision making, degree of formalization, and level of internal agreement on institutional mission.

In Spring 2000, surveys were mailed to the population of Catholic college and university presidents in the United States as identified by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU). Follow-up reminder cards were sent and telephone calls were made, respectively, at three-week and six-week intervals after the survey was

mailed. Analyses were based on completed survey responses from 40 percent (N=79) of the population.

Chi-square (χ^2) statistics were computed to determine whether views toward *Ex Corde* were dependent on institutional size or respondents' gender, age, clergy-lay status, years in current position, age at assumption of first presidency, and type of doctorate-granting institution. An alpha of .05 was used for all tests of statistical significance.

Sample

The majority (56.4 percent) of respondents was male. Most respondents were in their 50s (55.1 percent) or 60s+ (37.2 percent). The lay-clergy distribution was almost evenly divided – 48.7 percent lay, 51.3 percent clergy. Most presidents (94.9 percent) had earned a doctorate degree. A majority (71.6 percent) received the doctorate degree from a private institution.

Most respondents (56.4 percent) assumed their first presidential position when they were in their 50s or 60s. Others assumed their first position in their 40s (33.3 percent) or 30s (10.3 percent). Respondents have held their current presidencies for an average of 7.6 years. Only 3.9 percent of respondents have held their current positions for more than 20 years. Others have been incumbents for 2 years or fewer (20.5 percent), 3 to 5 years (30.8 percent), 6 to 10 years (19.2 percent), 11 to 15 years (14.1 percent), or 16 to 20 years (11.5 percent). The emerging profile shows a respondent group composed of both lay and clergy executives that is majority male, middle age, educated at the doctoral level at private universities, with 10 or fewer years as incumbents in their current presidential positions.

Respondents represented institutions with a range of enrollment sizes – less than 1000 students (20.5 percent), 1001 to 2000 (39.7 percent), 2001 to 5000 (24.4 percent), 5001 to 10,000 (10.3 percent), and more than 10,000 (5.1 percent). On most campuses (97.4 percent) the faculty were not unionized. Most institutions reserved some seats on the board of trustees for members of the founding religious community – no seats (17.6 percent), 1-20 percent of seats (39.2 percent), 21-40 percent of seats (36.4 percent), more than 40 percent (6.8 percent). The composite institutional profile delineated a group of small, non-unionized campuses with minority representation of founding religious community members on the governing board.

To determine whether the respondents were representative of the population, we compared survey results for gender, clergy-lay status, and institutional size to data provided by the ACCU. There were no significant differences between the respondents and the population with respect to these variables. Comparisons indicated that the survey respondents were generally representative of the population of US Catholic college and university presidents.

Findings

Institutional Context

A majority (70.5 percent) strongly agreed that competition with other colleges for student enrollments has increased over the past few years. Two-thirds (66.2 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that financial resources have become more difficult to obtain over the past few years.

Nearly ninety percent (89.7 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that people employed by their institution share a common definition of its mission. Forty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that there is a lot of resistance to change at their institution. A majority (51.3 percent) indicated that formal policies and rules govern most activities at their institution. Less than half (46.2 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that major decisions at their institutions are very centralized. Here, the profile appears to delineate a group of mission defined, procedurally-driven organizations operating within highly competitive markets with employees who share common understandings of their *raison d'être*.

Perceptions of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*

Two thirds (67.5 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that religion should be a high priority in hiring at Catholic colleges. Most (81.3 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that presidents of Catholic colleges should be dedicated and committed Catholics. A majority (56.6 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the majority of faculty should be Catholic. Only 38.2 percent agreed or strongly agreed that trustees should be dedicated and committed Catholics.

Respondents were divided as to whether the principles embodied in *Ex Corde* are compatible with academic freedom or institutional autonomy. A majority (53.8 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that academic freedom for faculty members and *Ex Corde* are compatible, but 25.6 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are compatible. A majority (50.6 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that institutional autonomy and *Ex Corde* are compatible, but 33.8 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are compatible.

Only 7.7 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that implementation of *Ex Corde* would make it difficult to recruit students. Nearly one-third (30.8 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that implementation of *Ex Corde* would make it difficult to recruit faculty members; however, 47.4 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that implementation would make faculty recruitment difficult. Only 10.3 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that implementation of *Ex Corde* would make it difficult to retain current faculty members. Table 1 includes the distribution of responses for each *Ex Corde* item.

INSERT TABLE 1

Some differences in perceptions of *Ex Corde* were found in relation to institutional size, as well as age, gender, and education of respondent. Presidents of small Catholic colleges (5000 or fewer students) were more likely to agree/strongly agree that institutional autonomy and *Ex Corde* are compatible than presidents of large Catholic colleges (more than 5000 students) – 60.9 percent vs. 34.5 percent, $\chi^2 = 7.39$, p=.025. Presidents of large Catholic colleges were more likely to agree/strongly agree that implementation of *Ex Corde* would make it difficult to recruit faculty – 46.7 percent vs. 19.6 percent, $\chi^2 = 7.58$, p=.023.

Older presidents (age 60 or above) were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree that religion should be a high priority in hiring than younger presidents (below age 60) – 31.0 percent vs. 6.5 percent, $\chi^2 = 9.80$, p=.007. Older presidents were also more likely to disagree/strongly disagree that trustees should be dedicated and committed Catholics – 41.4 percent vs. 15.6 percent, $\chi^2 = 6.29$, p=.043.

Male presidents appear to have disparate positions on the issue of whether institutional autonomy is compatible with *Ex Corde*. Men were more likely than women to agree/strongly agree that the two are compatible – 56.1 percent vs. 44.1 percent. Men were also more likely than women to disagree/strongly disagree that the two are compatible – 39.0 percent vs. 26.5 percent. A higher proportion of women than men indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that the two are compatible – 29.4 percent vs. 4.9 percent (χ^2 =8.40, p=.015).

Respondents who obtained their doctorate degree at private institutions were more likely to agree/strongly agree that religion should be a high priority in hiring than respondents who obtained their doctorate degree at public institutions – 74.5 percent vs. 42.9 percent (χ^2 = 7.77, p=.021). Years in current position, age at assumption of first presidency, and clergy-lay status were independent of respondents' perceptions of *Ex Corde*. Clergy and lay presidents were equally likely to express concerns about the impact of *Ex Corde* on autonomy and academic freedom. They were also equally likely to view *Ex Corde* as compatible with both.

Discussion

Presidents of large institutions were more likely to express concerns about the effects of *Ex Corde* on institutional autonomy and faculty recruitment. Such concerns may be associated with the complexity and level of cosmopolitanism of larger institutions where leadership commonly involves coalition building among diverse constituencies. Large institutions are likely to have a number of powerful constituency groups, and each may resist efforts to constrain its autonomy. Presidents of large institutions may be affirming, moreover, that implementation of an external mandate presents particular

strategic challenges in terms of gaining compliance from loosely-coupled organizational sub-units, and may place them in a rather untenable position as mediators of a dialogue between ecclesiastical and secular authorities.

Older respondents were less likely to agree that religion should be a priority in hiring and that trustees should be dedicated and committed Catholics. Results may suggest a generational division between older Catholics and younger counterparts. Traditional labels of older "conservative" and younger "liberal" executives appear to have no explanatory utility in this instance. Older respondents may have developed broader networks of professional contacts that extend beyond religious affiliation. As a consequence, older respondents may consider a broader array of individuals as potential hires and trustees. Alternatively, it may be suggested that mandates from Rome, in general, have differential impact in terms of perceptions of hegemony. Specifically, generational differences may have conditioned attitudes towards external mandates among older executives who entered the academic profession in the 1960s when authority was constantly being questioned. Older executives may view external authorities with more caution than younger executives do. It is impossible in the delimited framework of this study, however, to assert an impact of environmental influence on attitudes at a given point in time.

Male respondents reported higher levels of agreement and disagreement related to the question of whether *Ex Corde* and institutional autonomy are compatible. Their views were more polarized than female respondents, who may be more likely to view the question of compatibility as multi-faceted and not amenable to a single response. Future

research should consider multiple components of institutional autonomy, including curricular autonomy, hiring autonomy, and budgetary autonomy.

Respondents who obtained their doctorate degree at private institutions were more likely to agree that religion should be a priority in hiring. These private institutions may have been religiously-affiliated institutions where faith-based employment criteria are the norm. This study, however, did not ask respondents to specify whether the institutions from which they obtained their doctorates were affiliated with the Catholic Church or other denomination. Thus, interpretation of this finding remains speculative.

Conclusion

Organizational, economic, and legal issues surrounding implementation of *Ex Corde* present challenges for academic leadership. Agencies of oversight and the courts may elect to enter the higher education arena in response to implementation of *Ex Corde*. Accrediting agencies, for example, are already concerned with its potential impact, and the Supreme Court in the *Roemer* case recognized academic freedom and autonomy as critical factors which bear on the continued institutional participation in state and federal aid programs (Saunders, 1997; 1999).

Catholic college presidents themselves are not in agreement as to whether *Ex Corde* is compatible with guarantees of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Questions remain in terms of whether any Catholic college or university that wants to remain a true modern institution in the context of American higher education can elect to voluntarily adopt *Ex Corde*.

There is no shortage of editorial expression of criticism and concern about *Ex Corde,* and the proposals for and approaches to implementation (Allen, 2000; McMurtie,

2000; Niebuhr, 1999; O'Brien, 1999; Unsworth, 1999). The critical question, now, is whether Catholic colleges and universities that educate a little more than 1 percent of US Catholics can keep their current prosperity going ***and*** meet the requisites of *Ex Corde*; a mandate designed to stem the drift of US Catholic higher education away from its Catholic mooring. So far, the answer seems to be affirmative on the all-important enrollment side of the equation. Total enrollments have increased by 129,000 in the past decade (Unsworth, 1999). But, the implementation of *Ex Corde* has just begun.

The challenge to leadership will remain formidable in the context of *Ex Corde*. The perceptions of current and prospective students, faculty members, and financial supporters are important variables contributing to institutional success. Presidents who successfully convince generally supportive internal and external constituencies that the document does not pose a challenge to valid scholarship and teaching may mediate the warnings and projections of negative impact explicit in the editorial press.

Wilkes (1999) asserted that "the art is to keep our colleges and universities healthily Catholic in these tricky days without suffocating them with a supposed security blanket that will serve no one's ends" (p.17). That is easier said than done. We conclude, essentially at the beginning, with the dilemma at hand, manifest in a reported remark by the Pope. It was made in a private audience with some of the US college presidents' most senior and credible spokespersons who went to lobby him. They ardently explained why special circumstances determining their survival in the US left them no alternative but to present themselves publicly as civil, ostensibly secular, institutions answerable to no one – while, of course, comporting themselves privately as the Catholic schools that they have always been. The Pope is said to have replied, "Then

I think you will have to learn to get along without the American government's money" (Burtchaell, 1999, p. 38).

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Table 1
Catholic College Presidents' Perceptions of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*

		N	Percent
Religion should be a high priority in hiring at Catholic colleges.	Strongly agree	15	19.5
	Agree	37	48.1
	Neither	13	16.9
	Disagree	11	14.3
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3
The majority of faculty should be Catholic.	Strongly agree	10	13.2
	Agree	33	43.4
	Neither	20	26.3
	Disagree	12	15.8
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Trustees should be dedicated and committed Catholics.	Strongly agree	5	6.6
	Agree	24	31.6
	Neither	28	36.8
	Disagree	13	17.1
	Strongly disagree	6	7.9
Presidents of Catholic colleges should be dedicated and committed Catholics.	Strongly agree	39	52.0
	Agree	22	29.3
	Neither	9	12.0
	Disagree	4	5.3
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Academic freedom for faculty members and *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* are compatible.	Strongly agree	18	23.1
	Agree	24	30.8
	Neither	16	20.5
	Disagree	16	20.5
	Strongly disagree	4	5.1
Institutional autonomy and *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* are compatible.	Strongly agree	12	15.6
	Agree	27	35.1
	Neither	12	15.6
	Disagree	25	32.5
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* would make it difficult to recruit students at this institution.	Strongly agree	1	1.3
	Agree	4	5.1
	Neither	18	23.1
	Disagree	30	38.5
	Strongly disagree	25	32.1
Implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* would make it difficult to recruit new faculty members at this institution.	Strongly agree	3	3.8
	Agree	21	26.9
	Neither	17	21.8
	Disagree	26	33.3
	Strongly disagree	11	14.1
Implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* would make it difficult to retain current faculty members at this institution.	Strongly agree	2	2.6
	Agree	6	7.7
	Neither	10	12.8
	Disagree	39	50.0
	Strongly disagree	21	26.9